

Welcome

Y'all know I'm a big fan of sci-fi. I'm pretty sure the first movie I saw in a theater was *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (which I don't recommend in general for three-year-olds, but it got me hooked!).

I grew up on Captain Picard and the crew of the Enterprise-D. Right now, we're in the age of New Trek. From Star Trek: Discovery to the animated Lower Decks, it's a pretty amazing time to be a Star Trek fan.

What I love about Star Trek is that it's aspirational sci-fi. It's intentionally utopian. Any Star Trek fan can tell you about a favorite episode that tackles any number of real-world social issues. That is the DNA of Star Trek - when the original series premiered in 1966, at the height of both the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement, the bridge crew featured Lt. Uhura, a black woman, and Ensign Chekov, a Russian. Creator Gene Roddenberry was sending a message: we can choose to be the best versions of ourselves.

My favorite New Trek show is *Strange New Worlds*. It's set a few years before Kirk and the original series, and features a younger Spock and Uhura alongside Captain Christopher Pike.

The second season, which is wrapping up right now, features a genre which has become a classic Trek trope - the courtroom episode. These episodes offer a chance for Star Trek to pick directly at ethical questions that plague us today.

The second episode of the season, *Ad Astra Per Aspera*, features the trial of the show's first officer, Number One - aka Commander Unna Chen-Riley. At the end of the last season she was arrested because she is part of a race of aliens who freely use genetic modifications, something illegal in Starfleet. Because she lied about her race in order to become a Starfleet officer, she was jailed.

The trial was fascinating because everyone - even the prosecution - agreed that Number One is an amazing officer, and that Starfleet is better because she's part of it. But the fact remained that she broke the rules. So surely that means she must be punished, right?

Friends, *this* tension is at the heart of so much of faith. We are going to call it the tension between law and mercy. Law - doing the right thing. Mercy - doing what's best for someone.

Most of the time, those two things don't contradict each other - what's right is also what's legal. But there are times when those two things come into contradiction, like they did for Number One.

In those cases, what should a person of faith do? Do we follow God's law? Or do we follow God's command to love?

Today we're going to see that framing the question as a conflict between law and love is a false dichotomy. Because the deep purpose of God's law is to help us love our neighbors as ourselves. So when we follow the law well, we become loving, merciful people. And we get that from our God. So let's begin by worshiping together!

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

How can we resolve some of the places in scripture that talk about being separate and set apart with our calling to love our neighbors? How do we handle that with nuance?

This is a problem that flows directly out of what we explored last week - to be holy, to be faithful to God entails boundaries, laws, a distinction between right and wrong.

Some of those laws - like "murder is wrong" are pretty easy to apply. Some get more complicated though. Like "no stealing". Okay - don't take what's not yours. But what about the Aladdin problem - where he's stealing to eat. Is that wrong? If a society has been constructed in such a way that some people don't have enough to eat and some have far too much, who is the bigger thief?

But what about the laws that seem outdated? What about laws that seem to be... well, *wrong*?

What do we do when the laws God gave us to keep us holy come into conflict with God's command to love our neighbors?

The answer might be in a dream.

Turn with us to [Acts 10](#).

In the years following Jesus' resurrection, the first Christians faced a similar question to that of Starfleet. Jesus gave the church a mandate to preach the good news to all nations and make disciples of them. But what did that mean, exactly? After all, the other nations—the Gentiles—are not children of Abraham. To be anachronistic, they don't have the right genes. The law is clear.

The best solution many of the early Christians found was to invite the Gentiles to become Jews. The men had to circumcise themselves and they had to start observing the Jewish dietary code - only eating clean animals, avoiding unclean animals.

But then Peter had a dream. God presented Peter a smorgasbord of animals—all of them unclean. So we're talking pigs, shrimp, alligators, bears, catfish.

Peter responds the way a good, faithful Jew would respond. And watch what God says in return:

Peter went up on the flat roof to pray. It was about noon, and he was hungry. But while a meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners.

In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them."

"No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean."

But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean." The same vision was repeated three times. Then the sheet was suddenly pulled up to heaven.

Peter was very perplexed. What could the vision mean?

Just then the men sent by Cornelius found Simon's house. Standing outside the gate, they asked if a man named Simon Peter was staying there.

Meanwhile, as Peter was puzzling over the vision, the Holy Spirit said to him, "Three men have come looking for you. Get up, go downstairs, and go with them without hesitation. Don't worry, for I have sent them." — [Acts 10:9-20](#)

Don't call something unclean if God has made it clean. Now... we love this story because it means we can eat cheeseburgers and bacon-wrapped shrimp. But it's pretty obvious the dream isn't really about food - even Peter could tell that when he woke up. No, whatever is happening

has to do with these men who've shown up to ask Peter to come meet a Gentile named Cornelius.

Peter goes with them to Cornelius' house and - this is a big deal - he goes inside. A faithful Jew wouldn't set foot in a Gentile's house. It would make him *unclean*. It's one of those boundaries God said not to cross.

But Peter has that dream ringing in his ears... *Don't call something unclean if God has made it clean*. So... Peter goes in.

Cornelius tells him a wacky story: "Four days ago I was praying in my house about this same time, three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in dazzling clothes was standing in front of me. He told me, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your gifts to the poor have been noticed by God! Now send messengers to Joppa, and summon a man named Simon Peter. He is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner who lives near the seashore.' So I sent for you at once, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you." — [Acts 10:30-33](#)

Peter knows what to do... he tells them the good story about Jesus' resurrection. And as Peter is telling the Jesus story, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles and they start showing all the same signs as Peter and his friends did when *they'd* received the Holy Spirit.

Peter might be stubborn, but he's not a dummy. He sees what God is doing here, so he does something radical:

Then Peter asked, "Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" So he gave orders for them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. — [Acts 10:46-48](#)

These Gentiles don't have to convert to Judaism to be baptized into faith in Jesus. The Gentiles are no longer unclean. Whatever God is doing here, it's bigger than the categories God originally employed.

God changed the rules.

aNow, that doesn't answer our question quite yet, but I want to pause here and meditate on this. God can change the rules. God is bigger than God's instructions. And that's a good thing - when Peter figured it out, he called it good news!

Song

The fact that God can change the rules doesn't quite get us to what we do when law and love come into conflict.

Turn with us to [Matthew 13](#).

Here we find Jesus scandalizing the religious leaders by publicly associating himself with the unclean - tax collectors and sinners. They work up the nerve to ask Jesus' disciples how he can call himself a man of God if he's surrounding himself with the unclean. Let's look at Jesus' response:

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?"

When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do." Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices. — [Matthew 9:9-13](#)

Jesus quotes Hosea - one of the great Hebrew prophets. He tells the Pharisees that, when you're confronted with a choice between law and mercy, you choose mercy.

So is Jesus setting aside God's law? Is he saying "rules don't matter, just do the nice thing"?

No. Far from it. The truth is that the law *is* loving. The law *is* merciful.

This is what Number One's lawyer argues at the conclusion of her trial. I want to show you her closing argument because it's a brilliant, beautiful meditation on what law is, on the purpose of law.

[<Strange New Worlds scene>](#)

The Law is an ideal. The Law calls us to live up to our best selves. This is exactly how God's people understand God's law. It's not meant to hold us back, to make us small or mean or cruel. The Law is meant to lead us to be like God. To be like Jesus.

So when we experience conflict, we don't sacrifice law in the name of love. Rather, we choose to follow the law of love. Because God is love. Because God loved us before we could ever love. Because Jesus *is* love.

Communion + Examen

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When in the last week have I chosen the most loving way?

When in the last week have I allowed legalism to dictate how I treat someone?

When in the next week might I be tempted to let legalism dictate how I treat someone?

How can I choose the most loving way this week?

Assignment + Blessing